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Terminal lucidity: a review and a case collection

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Abstract

The unexpected return of mental clarity and memory shortly before death in patients suffering from severe psychiatric and neurologic disorders, which we have called "terminal lucidity", has been reported in the medical literature over the past 250 years, but has received little attention. We review a range of terminal lucidity cases in order to encourage investigation of the mechanisms involved and possible insights into both the neuroscience of memory and cognition at the end of life and treatment of terminal illness. These examples include case reports of patients suffering from brain abscesses, tumors, strokes, meningitis, dementia or Alzheimer's disease, schizophrenia, and affective disorders. Several of these accounts suggest that during terminal lucidity, memory and cognitive abilities may function by neurologic processes different from those of the normal brain. We expect that significant contributions to better understanding the processes involved in memory and cognition processing might be gained through in-depth studies of terminal lucidity. Studying terminal lucidity might also facilitate the development of novel therapies. In addition, increased awareness of unusual end-of-life experiences could help physicians, caregivers, and bereaved family members be prepared for encountering such experiences, and help those individuals cope with them.